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THREE NEGRO POETS: HORTON, MRS. HARPER, AND WHITMAN ¹

With the exception of a few noteworthy individuals, conscious literary effort on the part of the Negro in America is, of course, a matter of comparatively recent years. Decades before Emancipation, however, there were those who yearned toward poetry as a means of artistic expression, and sought in this form to give vent to their groping, their striving, and their sorrow. Handicapped as they were, scores of these black bards must forever remain unknown. Even after the Civil War those who had gifts were frequently held back by insufficient education or the lack of other advantages of culture. At least three persons, however, in the long period between Phillis Wheatley and Paul Dunbar, deserve not wholly to pass unnoticed. These were George Moses Horton, Mrs. Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, and Albery A. Whitman. Each one of these poets had faults and even severe limitations as an artist. Each one had also, however, a spark of the divine fire that occasionally even kindled a flame.

George M. Horton was born a slave in Chatham County, North Carolina, in 1797. Later he became the property of one Hall Horton, son of James, who, from all accounts, was a very hard master. George, however, was permitted to hire his time out at Chapel Hill, the seat of the University of North Carolina, where by some accounts he received twenty-five cents a day for his labor, by others fifty cents. He was very ambitious. He was fond of the melodies and hymns sung at campmeetings, and learned to read largely by matching the words he knew in the hymnal to those in a spelling-book. Many people of distinction became interested in his abilities; several legends exist as to

¹ This paper was read at the biennial meeting of the Association held in Washington, D. C., on August 29, 1917.

his instructors; and Dr. Caldwell, president of the University, was for some years a special patron. George's earliest poetical compositions, however, had to be written down for him by other people. His work was infused with his desire for freedom, and much of it was suggested by the common evangelical hymns, as were the following lines:

Alas! and am I born for this,
To wear this slavish chain?
Deprived of all created bliss,
Through hardship, toil, and pain?

How long have I in bondage lain,
And languished to be free!
Alas! and must I still complain,
Deprived of liberty?

Come, Liberty, thou cheerful sound,
Roll through my ravished ears;
Come, let my grief in joys be drowned,
And drive away my fears.

Some of Horton's friends undertook to help him publish a volume of his poems so that from the sale of these he might purchase his freedom and go to the new colony of Liberia. The young man now became fired with ambition and inspiration. Thrilled by the new hope he wrote

'Twas like the salutation of the dove,
Borne on the zephyr through some lonesome grove,
When spring returns, and winter's chill is past,
And vegetation smiles above the blast.

Horton's master, however, demanded for him an exorbitant price, and when the booklet, *The Hope of Liberty*, appeared in 1829 it had nothing of the sale that was hoped for. He lived for years as a janitor at the University, executed small commissions for verse from the students, who treated him kindly, and in later years even went to Philadelphia; but his old dreams had faded. Several reprintings of his poems were made, however, and one of these was bound with the 1838 edition of Phillis Wheatley's poems. He died in 1880 (by other accounts 1883). A scholarly article about

him was written for the *Southern Workman* of October, 1914, by Mr. Stephen B. Weeks, who in turn owed much to the researches of Prof. George S. Wills.

Horton's work showed readily the influence of his models. He used especially the meter of the common evangelical hymns, and cultivated the vague personification of the poets of the eighteenth century. He himself, however, was essentially a romantic poet, as was evinced by his fondness for Byron and Marlowe. His common style is represented by the following lines from his poem entitled *On the Evening and Morning*:

When Evening bids the Sun to rest retire,
Unwearied Ether sets her lamps on fire;
Lit by one torch, each is supplied in turn,
Till all the candles in the concave burn.

.
At length the silver queen begins to rise,
And spread her glowing mantle in the skies,
And from the smiling chambers of the east,
Invites the eye to her resplendent feast.

The passion in the heart of this man, his undoubted gifts as a poet, and the bitter disappointment of his yearnings have all but added one more to the long list of those who died with their ambitions blasted and their most ardent hopes defeated.

In 1854 appeared the first edition of *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects*, by Frances Ellen Watkins, commonly known as Mrs. Frances E. W. Harper, who was for many years before the public and who is even now remembered by many friends. Mrs. Harper was a woman of strong personality and could read her poems to advantage. Her verse was very popular, not less than ten thousand copies of her booklets being sold. It was decidedly lacking in technique, however, and much in the style of Mrs. Hemans. *The Death of the Old Sea King*, for instance, is in the ballad style cultivated by this poet and Longfellow; but it is not a well-sustained effort. Mrs. Harper was best when most simple, as when in writing of children she said:

I almost think the angels
 Who tend life's garden fair,
 Drop down the sweet white blossoms
 That bloom around us here.

The secret of her popularity is to be seen in such lines as the following from *Bury me in a Free Land*:

Make me a grave where'er you will,
 In a lowly plain or a lofty hill;
 Make it among earth's humblest graves,
 But not in a land where men are slaves.

I could not rest if around my grave
 I heard the steps of a trembling slave:
 His shadow above my silent tomb
 Would make it a place of fearful gloom.

.
 I ask no monument, proud and high,
 To arrest the gaze of the passers-by;
 All that my yearning spirit craves
 Is bury me not in a land of slaves.

Of the Emancipation Proclamation she wrote:

It shall flash through coming ages,
 It shall light the distant years;
 And eyes now dim with sorrow
 Shall be brighter through their tears.

While Mrs. Harper was still prominently before the public appeared Albery A. Whitman, a Methodist minister, whose important collection, *Not a Man and Yet a Man*, appeared in 1877, and whose long and ambitious poem, *Twasinta's Seminoles*, or *The Rape of Florida* (the latter title being the one most used), was issued in 1884. This writer had great love for his work. In the preface to his second volume he wrote of poetry as follows: "I do not believe poetry is on the decline. I do not believe that human advancement extinguishes the torch of sentiment. I can not think that money-getting is the whole business of man. Rather am I convinced that the world is approaching a poetical revolution. The subtle evolution of thought must yet be expressed in song. Poetry is the language of

universal sentiment. Torch of the unresting mind, she kindles in advance of all progress. Her waitings are on the threshold of the infinite, where, beckoning man to listen, she interprets the leaves of immortality. Her voice is the voice of Eternity dwelling in all great souls. Her aims are the inducements of heaven, and her triumphs the survival of the Beautiful, the True, and the Good. In her language there is no mistaking of that liberal thought which is the health of mind. A secret interpreter, she waits not for data, phenomena, and manifestations, but anticipates and spells the wishes of Heaven."

The work of Whitman himself is exceedingly baffling. It is to his credit that something about his work at once commands judgment by the highest standards. If we consider it on this basis, we find that it is diffuse, exhibits many lapses in taste, is faulty metrically, as if done in haste, and shows imitation on every hand. It imitates Whittier, Longfellow and Tennyson; Scott, Byron and Moore. *The Old Sac Village* and *Nanawawa's Suitors* are very evidently *Hiawatha* over again, and *Custer's Last Ride* is simply another version of *The Charge of the Light Brigade*. And yet, whenever one has about decided that Whitman is not worthy of consideration, the poet insists on a revision of judgment; and he certainly could not have imitated so many writers so readily, if he had not had some solid basis in appreciation. The fact is that he shows a decided faculty for brisk, though not sustained, narration. This may be seen in *The House of the Aylors*. He has, moreover, a romantic lavishness of description that in spite of all technical faults still has some degree of merit. The following quotations, taken respectively from *The Mowers* and *The Flight of Leona*, with all their extravagance, will exemplify both his weakness and his strength in description:

The tall forests swim in a crimson sea,
Out of whose bright depths rising silently,
Great golden spires shoot into the skies,
Among the isles of cloudland high, that rise,
Float, scatter, burst, drift off, and slowly fade,

Deep in the twilight, shade succeeding shade.

And now she turns upon a mossy seat,
Where sings a fern-bound stream beneath her feet,
And breathes the orange in the swooning air;
Where in her queenly pride the rose blooms fair,
And sweet geranium waves her scented hair;
There, gazing in the bright face of the stream,
Her thoughts swim onward in a gentle dream.

In *A Dream of Glory* occur the lines,

The fairest blooms are born of humble weeds,
That faint and perish in the pathless wood;
And out of bitter life grow noble deeds
To pass unnoticed in the multitude.

The Bards of England discusses many poets. The following is the passage on Byron:

To Missolonghi's chief of singers too,
Unhappy Byron, is a tribute due—
A wounded spirit, mournful and yet mad,
A genius proud, defiant, gentle, sad;
'Twas he whose Harold won his Nation's heart,
And whose Reviewers made her fair cheeks smart;
Whose uncurbed Juan hung her head for shame,
And whose Mazeppa won unrivaled fame.
Earth had no bound for him. Where'er he strode
His restless genius found no fit abode.

Whitman's shortcomings become readily apparent when he attempts sustained work. *The Rape of Florida* is the longest poem yet written by a Negro in America, and also the only attempt by a member of the race to use the elaborate Spenserian stanza throughout a long piece of work. The story is concerned with the capture of the Seminoles in Florida through perfidy and the taking of them away to their new home in the West. It centers around three characters, Palmecho, an old chief, Ewald, his daughter, and Atlassa, a young Seminole who is Ewald's lover. The poem is decidedly diffuse; there is too much subjective description, too little strong characterization. Palmecho, instead of being a stout warrior, is a "chief of peace and

kindly deeds." Stanzas of merit, however, occasionally strike the eye. The boat-song forces recognition as genuine poetry:

"Come now, my love, the moon is on the lake;
Upon the waters is my light canoe;
Come with me, love, and gladsome oars shall make
A music on the parting wave for you,—
Come o'er the waters deep and dark and blue;
Come where the lilies in the marge have sprung,
Come with me, love, for Oh, my love is true!"
This is the song that on the lake was sung,
The boatman sang it over when his heart was young.

It is important to note in a consideration of Whitman's method that while he is writing a story about Indians he frequently leaves this to tell how he feels as a Negro. The following stanzas, however, are pertinent to present-day discussion:

'Tis hard to judge if hatred of one's race,
By those who deem themselves superior-born,
Be worse than that quiescence in disgrace,
Which only merits—and *should* only—scorn!
Oh! let me see the Negro, night and morn,
Pressing and fighting in, for place and power!
If he a proud escutcheon would adorn,
All earth is place—all time th' auspicious hour,
While heaven leans forth to see, oh! can he quail or cower?

Ah! I abhor his protest and complaint!
His pious looks and patience I despise!
He can't evade the test, disguised as saint,
The manly voice of freedom bids him rise,
And shake himself before Philistine eyes!
And, like a lion roused, no sooner than
A foe dare come, play all his energies,
And court the fray with fury if he can!
For hell itself respects a fearless manly man.

In 1890 Whitman brought out an edition of *Not a Man and Yet a Man* and *The Rape of Florida*, adding to these a collection of miscellaneous poems, *Drifted Leaves*, and in 1901 he published *An Idyl of the South*, an epic poem in

two parts. It is to be regretted that he did not have the training that comes from the best university education. He had the taste and the talent to benefit from such culture in the greatest degree.

This brief review of the work of three earnest members of the race prompts a few reflections on the whole art of poetry as this is cultivated by the Negro in America. If we may make any reasonable deduction from the work of the poets studied, if we may arrive at any conclusion from the work of Paul Laurence Dunbar and the younger writers of the day, we should say that the genius of the race is subjective and romantic rather than objective and classic. In poetry, least of all arts, does the Negro conceal his individuality. This is his great gift, but also in another way the spur to further achievement. The race should in course of time produce many brilliant lyric poets. Dunbar was a lyric poet; so was Pushkin. The drama and the epic obviously call for more extended information, a more objective point of view, and a broader basis in general culture than many members of the race have so far had the time or the talent or the inclination to give to them.

Again, has one ever asked himself why it is that so much of the poetry of the Negro fails to reach the ultimate standards of art? It certainly is not because of lack of imagination, for God has been generous in the imagery with which he has endowed the race. First of all, last of all, is it not the matter of technique? Many booklets of verse that have been issued show that the writers had not mastered even the ordinary fundamentals of English grammar. For one to think of rivalling Tennyson with his classical tradition when he can not make a clearcut English sentence is out of the question. Further, and this is the most important point, the work of those in question almost never exhibits imagination expressed in intense, condensed, vivid, and suggestive phrase—such phrasing, for instance, as one will find in "The Eve of St. Agnes," which I am not alone in considering the most lavishly brilliant and successful brief effort in poetry in the language. To all of this might be added a

refining of taste, something all too frequently lacking and something that can come only from the most arduous and diligent culture. When we further secure such things as these the race may indeed possess not only a Horton, a Harper, or a Whitman, but a Tennyson, a Keats, and even a Shakespeare.

BENJAMIN BRAWLEY